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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000054

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR ELECTION UPDATE: JANUARY 15

¶1. (U) Summary: This is an update regarding the Salvadoran municipal and legislative elections scheduled for January 18, and the presidential elections scheduled for March 15. This report includes public and private statements by the (left-wing) Farabundo Marti Front for the National Liberation Party (FMLN), a public warning by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Spanish and Italian Ambassadors, and reports of violence at an FMLN rally.

FMLN SENDS MIXED MESSAGES

¶2. (U) Leading morning newspaper La Prensa Grafica published an interview with senior FMLN member Jose Luis Merino on January 13. In the interview, Merino asserted: "the party has not lost the socialist dream." (Note: Merino has been linked in press reports to Colombia's FARC. End Note.) Later in the day, (centrist) newspaper El Mundo published an interview with FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes who stated that his government would not build socialism nor the conditions for socialism. He said his government would build a democratic, just, and supportive society.

FMLN OPTIMISTIC ABOUT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

¶3. (C) FMLN Santa Ana Deputy Roberto Lorenzana and San Salvador legislative candidate Orestes Orteztold Poloffstold January 12 that they were very optimistic about their party's chances in the January 18 legislative elections. Lorenzana, likely to maintain his Santa Ana seat, projected that the FMLN would win 38 to 39 seats out of a total of 84. He dismissed the notion that a big FMLN victory would scare off centrist and undecided voters, thereby hurting the cause of presidential candidate Mauricio Funes in the March elections. Conversely, Lorenzana said a strong FMLN showing on Sunday would give Funes further momentum.

¶4. (C) Orestes Orteztold (an executive in the Venezuela-financed "ALBA-Petroleos" business), a virtual lock for a San Salvador legislative seat, was even more optimistic, predicting up to 40 FMLN legislative seats. He acknowledged the ingrained apprehension of the general public to vote for the "old guerilla fighters," but said Funes' popularity was allaying those fears. Orteztold asserted the presidential race would affect the legislative races more than the converse, despite legislative elections taking place two months prior. He said Funes' "fresh face" and moderate ideals were winning over the public, and the effects would manifest themselves in a big FMLN victory on the legislative and municipal levels.

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS WARNS ITALY AND SPAIN

15. (U) On January 12, Minister of Foreign Affairs Marisol Argueta de Barillas, asked the Ambassadors of Spain and Italy to remind their citizens that the Constitution and Electoral Code forbid foreigners from participating indirectly or directly in politics. The warning came after Spanish congressman Willy Meyer Pleite and Italian congressman Giusto Catanian urged Salvadorans to vote for the FMLN in a morning interview January 9.

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AT FMLN RALLY

16. (U) On January 12, media reported that ARENA and FMLN sympathizers clashed at an event for incumbent (left-wing) Farabundo Marti Front for the National Liberation Party (FMLN) Mayor Violeta Menjivar. During the scuffle, one FMLN follower received a head injury and one (pro- U.S., center right) Nationalist Republican Alliance Party (ARENA) follower was shot in the arm. ARENA and FMLN representatives blamed each other for this event. Menjivar filed a complaint before the Attorney General January 13 claiming that she was warned by area street vendors about possible violence. ARENA San Salvador Coordinator Adolfo Torres publicly stated that the violence was orchestrated by the FMLN.

OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN SEASON ENDS

17. (U) As stipulated in the electoral code, the official municipal and legislative assembly campaign ends at midnight January 14.

GLAZER